DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 330 95 EA 011 251

AUTHOR Alschuler, Alfred
TITLE Discipline: A Socially Literate Solution.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 78
CONTRACT 77-0031
NOTE 19p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Problems; *Communication Skills; *Conflict Resolution; Discipline Policy; *Discipline Problems; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Problem Solving; *Student Teacher Relationship

ABSTRACT

This document is a summary of a book entitled tentatively "Discipline: A Socially Literate Solution" by the same author. The book, based on seven years of research and development, is intended to be a manual for educators and students. The method described takes as its starting point that discipline problems can be reduced significantly if educators collaboratively name patterns of conflict, analyze systemic causes, and democratically improve the rules and roles governing behavior. It lays out a theory on the causes of discipline problems in schools and then offers specific techniques for their amelioration. The summary presents an overview of the theory with examples and then indicates chapter by chapter the content of the book. (Author/MLF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED165330

DISCIPLINE

A Socially Literate Solution

Alfred Alschuler PhD., D.H.L.

Discipline problems can be reduced significantly if educators collaboratively name patterns of conflict, analyze systemic causes and democratically improve the rules and roles governing behavior. The book, based on seven years of research and development, is a manual for educators and students. This executive summary describes Socially Literate problem-solving and presents a synopsis of the book.*

How would you solve this problem? You teach in a desegregated urban junior high school. Every day the same student arrives late to your class without a pass. The daily doorway scene reminds you of Tom Sawyer's attempts to persuade Aunt Polly that being late was caused by unavoidable and highly virtuous rescue missions. Whether or not you believe the excuses, the discussion always steals precious learning time from the whole class. The interruptions bother you and the other students.

What would you do? Try to change the student? Coax him? Threaten him? Send him to the front office? Enlist other students to exert peer pressure? Meet with him after class to

EA 011 251

*Discipline: A Socially Literate Solution will be published in 1979 by

For assistance in any type of Social literacy training, contact Alfred Alschuler, 456 Hills South, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA., 01003

negotiate a better "contract?"

All of these solutions assume that the cause of the problem is in the student. In this example, as well as most other daily problems faced by educators, there also are causes in the system of schooling--that is, in the rules and roles and goals that bind us together in a common enterprise. For instance, in the school where these doorway debates took place, we discovered that teachers had made 121 referrals to the front office over the courseof a year because these "con jobs" had broken down into angry confrontations. Approximately one-third of these students were expelled from school--paradoxically, a punishment quite similar to the "crime." In a school of I,200 students, this was a problem of epidemic proportions. No matter what an individual teacher did with an individual student, "the problem" would remain, just as the successful treatment of a malaria victim does not eradicate the epidemic. That requires getting to the systemic causes, i.e., getting rid of malarial mosquitoes.

In this school, the principal changed a rule. The next year all students late to class went immediately to the front office for a free pass, up to three times. A fourth "lateness" was considered a chronic personal problem and led to a serious discussion. This simple system change resulted in a 75% reduction in this type of referral to the front office, fewer classroom conflicts and interruptions, and more learning time. In retrospect, the success of this solution indicates that the cause of the "epidemic" was in the system of rules that forced

students and teachers into conflict.

It is easy to imagine that some Machiavellian social architect has created a constant cruel joke in which students, teachers, and administrators are always diverted from seeing the system causes of problems because they are so busy blaming each other. So long as individuals battle alone, the epidemics remain invisible. One way to overcome this blindness is to organize a small group of educators to name common problems, to analyze systemic causes, and to take democratic action to improve the system. This process is "socially literate" because, as in all kinds of literacy, we try to read reality, understand it better, and take informed action.

NAMING PATTERNS OF CONFLICT

Most of the techniques invented by social literacy groups for identifying common problems are solutions to a specific problem. For instance, Ms. Fallon, a beginning teacher, was hired as a "long-term sub" to teach English and music in a junior high school. After several months the principal referred her to a social literacy group because she was having problems, especially in her combined fifth /sixth period class. Although officially she taught music one period, and English the other, there was no discernible difference. Anarchy was constant, and flying objects (e.g., chairs) often created the impression of a front line under heavy bombardment. Most of the students

wandered around the room, talking, braiding hair, "ranking" each other, standing on desks, or fighting while two or three students worked with Ms. Fallon at her desk, seemingly oblivious to the general disorder.

Ms. Fallon, however, did not think she had a problem! She had not seen anyone else's class and did not know her class deviated from a school norm. Nor had she taken college courses on how to establish discipline. In fact, her previous work experience prepared her to accept this type of classroom organization. She had been the leader of a group of tobacco-pickers for several summers. She did her work, left others alone, and was available to those who needed help. This was the way she led her junior high school classes.

After several teachers from the social literacy groups had observed her class, they realized that "survival" was the name of the game, and Ms. Fallon didn't know the rules. It was as if she had entered a hockey rink ready to lead a scout troop on an expedition. The social literacy group created a "survival guide" consisting of all the formal and informal rules of the school; e.g., never let a student out of class without a pass; keep all the window shades in the front of the school at the same length. There were more than 100 such rules.

The teachers realized that there were insufficient procedures for orienting new and substitute teachers to all the rules. Any new teacher was likely to have difficulty if inserted into the classroom with no coaching and a minimal

explanation of the school game. This social literacy group helped establish a school policy that all new teachers would be invited to join their group. This reduced common beginner problems. The group also publicly advocated the simple expedient of democratically determining with students the rules for them and for subs when the teacher was absent. This advance planning reduced the widespread discipline game of "get the sub."

A second method of naming common problems resulted from reading the faces of teachers in school. Most teachers are in a constant state of mild to extreme stress. One social literacy group created a "stress hunt" in which teachers interviewed each other, asking questions like, "At what point during the day do you feel most tired? What is the most emotionally draining activity of the day? What do other teachers say causes greatest physical and emotional fatigue?" In our first stress hunt we summarized an extensive list into 13 categories: rigid curriculum, problems with parents; class size, discipline problems, conflicts with the administrators, destruction of school property, paperwork, lack of equipment and materials, lack of teacher input into decisions, lack of planning time, interruptions that disrupt class, dress code, racial strife. Then, every day for two weeks, as soon as school ended, teachers rated each stress on a three-point scale as "not stressful," "stressful," or "very stressful." The most consistent high-intensity stresses were "interruptions" and "discipline problems."

Interestingly, when the same general procedure was conducted with students, they too identified interruptions as the problem that bugged them most.

A third technique helped clarify a system cause of interruptions. We developed a method of assessing mutually agreed-upon learning time (MALT) during a class. Ten students are randomly selected and observed every four minutes in a 43-minute class for a total of 100 observations. At each observation the rater must decide whether instructional material is present (e.g., a discussion of a math problem versus class attention to a discipline problem), and whether or not the student is paying attention to the instructional material. The MALT percentage is simply the number of times out of 100 that students are paying attention to instructional material. In obtaining many MALT scores, in more than 25 classrooms we discovered that every time the public address system was used there was a four to eight-minute disruption in many classes. These interruptions occurred regularly in spite of a rule negotiated by the teacher union formally restricting the use of the P.A. system to the first and last five minutes of class periods. Although it is possible that behavior modification techniques or other methods of controlling students could reduce classroom disruptions, here was a single, simple, system cause that had been invisible until the MALT scores were analyzed collaboratively by teachers in the social literacy groups. After a discussion with the Social Literacy group the principal agreed that

restricting PA announcements to the beginning and end of class would be to everyone's advantage. Discipline conflicts and referrals to the front office decreased, and learning time increased.

ANALYZING THE SYSTEMIC CAUSES

Even when schoolwide problems that beg for systemic explanations are identified, our ingrained mind-sets often lead us to assume that individuals are responsible. For instance, at the end of the first semester, in one junior high school 183 of 450 seventh-graders were failing one or more subjects. This was twice the rate of the previous year. Yet their scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills were 10% higher than the previous year. The principal was concerned and asked the guidance counselor to investigate the problem--no, not by looking for changes in grading policies, textbooks, new norms among teachers, increases in student loads, etc., but by talking with each one of those 183 students individually. His request was well-intentioned, but no matter how it's done, when students are called into the guidance counselor's office to discuss the causes for failing grades, students assume they are to blame.

Very often social scientists are equally blind to system causes and collude in blaming victims. Scores of studies have been conducted that ask questions like, "What are the characteristics of problem students?" We asked that question, and

our data "proved" that such students are more often boys than girls, proportionately more of them are in ninth than the eighth or seventh grades, they have lower IQ's and lower reading scores, and they are disproportionately black. What do such "results" mean? Obviously, we could decrease the number of referrals to the front office by mass preventive expulsion of black, low IQ, ninth-grade males at the beginning of the year. But in doing so we would be punishing the victims a second time.

We also asked, "What are the characteristics of teachers who have more discipline problems?" The answer, in brief, is: young, first-year, without tenure. The solution: Get rid of all young teachers without tenure. Obviously, both solutions are absurd, because the questions are misleading. The questions dictate the answers. We can only find individual characteristics if that's all we look for.

Perhaps our tendency to blame persons rather than systems stems from our formal and informal education. From toilet training to lectures in the assistant principal's office, from merit badges to diplomas, from the Declaration of Independence (every individual has the right to pursue...) to marriage contracts, from mass media that display our magnificent array of choices to courts that hold individuals accountable for their poor choices, we have been taught to believe that we determine our own behavior. And we have a pervasive, gut-level, unnamed conviction that the schools in which we work are basically democratic, unoppressive, and sound.

Unfortunately, when system causes of behavior are ignored, we often unconsciously collude in victimizing each other in the name of solving the problem. For instance, after a series of serious assaults in the hallways after school, a junior high school principal called an emergency faculty meeting. For 25 minutes, the assistant principal berated the entire faculty for their unprofessional conduct in not standing in the hallways after class to maintain order. To protect students from physical assault, the well-intentioned, highly respected assistant principal had verbally assaulted the teachers, and they felt it.

One teacher, and only one teacher, suggested, "A possible cause of running in the hallways after school might be the bus schedule. The buses leave four minutes after school is out. Students <u>have</u> to run. Maybe the bus could wait a few extra minutes." The assistant principal, always supportive of the system, replied that the buses "had" to get to the next school on time. Even this perfectly logical, simple system-blame explanation (albeit only partial) was not truly heard, seen, and explored.

The person-blaming cycle of well-intentioned violence continued. An over-eager teacher was observed pulling a student into the front office by the collar.

"Sit down!" The student hung his head but remained standing.

"Sit down!!" (Said as if the student were a disobedient dog.)

"You'd better watch yourself," the student mumbled.

"I'll watch myself when you're this high," indicating a Wilt Chamberlain type. "What's your name?" Silence. "What's your name?!"

The principal, who was standing nearby filling out a tardy pass, said to the teacher calmly, "That's O.K. I'll handle it." After finding out that the crime was running in the hallways, he let the teacher go back to his class.

It is easy to feel sympathy for the student who was brutalized with words, but how do we choose to view that teacher? As a sadist, who should be held personally accountable for his inhumane enforcement of the rule? Or as a well-meaning teacher under stress, who was victimized by a rule that forced him and the student into conflict?

A basic credo of social literacy groups is that overemphasis on blaming persons not only prevents us from seeing fundamental system causes but <u>creates</u> a cycle of adversary relationships based on uncharitable assumptions. Although it is appropriate to feel upset about the pain inflicted on all victims, it is not appropriate to direct our anger naively at those individuals who appear to be inflicting the damage. Most people are doing their jobs as best they know how and believe that their efforts will promote the common good. The goals of social literacy training are to change oppressive roles, not the role inhabitants; oppressive goals, not those who advocate them; oppressive rules, not the rule enforcers; oppressive practices, not the

practitioners; oppressive policies, not the policy makers; oppressive norms, not the normal people who act them out. We believe in the principle that it is both more humane and usually more effective to see these distinctions clearly and to cherish all persons while collaboratively acting to change oppressive aspects of the system.

CHANGING THE SYSTEM DEMOCRATICALLY

Getting together with a group of teachers to name, understand, and solve common problems is unusual. For the better part of each working day, teachers are isolated from other adults, a working condition suffered in few other professions. There is almost no time when a significant number of teachers have simultaneous free time for discussion, planning, and collaborative action. What minimal free time is available must be spent in preparation or recuperation. In some schools there are strong informal norms against serious discussion of educational issues in the lunchroom and teacher's lounge, where cards and gossip are useful diversions. Shortly after the final bell, many teachers leave school as if shot from a cannon, too tired to spend an extra hour thinking about school. Teachers who are isolated and preoccupied in these ways remain unaware of shared problems and are relatively powerless.

When a social literacy group does meet, it is radical in at least three senses. As in mathematics, where a "radical"

is an essential quantity of a larger quantity, social literacy groups try to name the essential sytem causes of widespread problems. In botany, a radical is that which grows out of a root. As teachers become socially literate, radical explanations grow out of naming the root system causes. In politics, being a radical means to advocate basic social change, in the same sense that the social literacy group focuses on the transformation of troublesome rules and roles rather than on the rule enforcers and role occupants. For instance, we are more interested in negotiating simple changes in the school's tardiness rules than in training all teachers in better doorway tactics. We are more interested in radical solutions to the problem of students racing for the exits after school (e.g., changing the bus schedule) than in coaxing other teachers to patrol the hallways. We are more interested in controlling the use of the P.A. system than in training teachers to be better classroom managers of the disruptions it causes.

However, we do not believe there are any standard solutions; even if there were, their implementation would vary with each school. It is important for each educator and every social literacy group to engage in the process of naming its own realities, to reflect on the systemic causes of specific problems, and to transform the system cooperatively. Discipline: A Socially Literate Solution contains the principles, methods and steps enabling educators to do this. Based on seven years of collaborative problem-solving and research in schools, it

has been used successfully by individuals and groups as part of in-service and pre-service teacher training. The book combines practical guidance, and numerous illustrative solutions with Paulo Freire's theory of liberation that arouses teachers' latent idealism. The writing style is personal, concrete and engaging in deliberate contrast with most educational texts. The following synopsis of chapters conveys the essence of the content but not the style of writing.

PART I: SOCIALLY LITERATE GOALS

Chapter 1. Schools Where It Is Easier To Love

The ultimate goal of Paulo Freire's practice and the theory of education is to create a world in which it is easier to love. In contrast, oppressive situations exist when people are in systematic conflict or when their human development is blocked. People can liberate themselves from conflict and free themselves to develop by democratically naming, analyzing and changing these oppressive conditions. Democratic problem-solving, therefore, is both a method for creating schools where it is easier to love and a process that embodies loving human relationships. Chapter one illustrates these concepts with examples of dramatically quick and effective literacy training in Latin America where Paulo Freire worked to develop a literate, democratically active populace.

Chapter 2. Liberating People From Conflict

We translated Paulo Freire's theory into practice in the Hartford, Connecticut and Springfield, Massachusetts school systems. Social Literacy groups in these schools and educators from the University of Massachusetts named the epidemic conflict at the heart of discipline problems (the battle for students' attenion), analyzed the systemic causes (war games, tactics, and strategies) and democratically created new rules and roles that brought peace to scores of interpersonal relationships, classrooms and school-wide situations. The results of a research evaluation indicated extremely positive attitudes of participating teachers about Social Literacy, significantly decreased classroom conflict, significantly increased academic achievement, significantly greater order and democratic participation by students and a 75% reduction in referrals to the front office for disciplining. The techniques invented by these Social Literacy groups for naming, analyzing and solving problems are presented in Part Two of the book.

PART II: SOCIALLY LITERATE METHODS

Chapter 3. The Nuclear Problem-Solving Process

Instructions for this twenty-minute technique for two or more people guide them to socially literate solutions. A solution is socially literate if it (1) focuses on a pattern of conflict, not an incident, (2) identifies causes in conflict-

producing rules and roles, (3) considers alternative solutions, (4) is implemented democratically, (5) is mutually agreeable and (6) is sustained. Examples from classroom and schools illustrate the techniques and concepts in this and subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4. Conquering Burn-out, Battle Fatigue and Frenzy

Stress is educators' number one health problem. Several social literacy techniques enable groups of educators or students to name and prioritize common stresses that cause conflict and reduce maximum functioning.

Chapter 5. Increasing Learning Time

The method of measuring Mutually Agreed-upon Learning Time (MALT) is described. This technique also helps discover the prevalent war games, tactics and strategies occurring in non-learning time. Naming the problems of stress and learning time in these ways facilitates collaboration in Socially Literate problem-solving.

Chapter 6. Raising Consciousness

Freire describes three stages in individuals' consciousness of problems. In the "magical-conforming" stage individuals deny or avoid problems, see difficulties as facts of existence and wait passively, accommodate, adjust, and conform.

In the second "naive-reforming" stage, people identify problems in individuals (themselves or others) who deviate from the system's rules and roles. They must be reformed. These two stages are the prevalent mind-sets about school discipline problems. In the third "critical transforming" stage, individuals name central problems in the system's rules and roles that cause conflict. They take democratic action to transform these oppressive aspects of the system. Illustrations of these stages cover a broad area from school conflicts to women's liberation. Exercises in the last section help people critically analyze problems of discipline, stress, and lost learning time named in previous chapters. Subsequent chapters concentrate on democratic, transforming action.

Chapter 7. Creating Guides for Survival and Liberation

Survival in schools requires that we play by the formal and informal rules. Instructions in this chapter lead people to name these rules in school, in race relations and in sex role relationships. When specific oppressive rules are identified, they constitute precise targets for collaborative, democratic action. Transforming those rules liberates people.

Chapter 8. Speaking True Words About Central Conflicts

The first step in socially literate action is to speak a "true word." True words are spoken, heard and embedded in dialogue, have existential meaning, analyze problems and constitute

a commitment to solve the problem. The chapter also presents a quick, simple method for naming an organization's central conflict. This provides a test situation for individuals to see if they are willing and able to speak a true word.

Chapter 9. Resolving Discipline Conflicts Through Dialogue

True dialogue cannot exist in the absence of love, humility, faith, trust, hope and critical-transforming consciousness. Examples of conversation in a school disciplinarian's office and a classroom illustrate anti-dialogue based on domination and characterized by threats, humiliation, mistrust, resistance and naive-reforming consciousness. Examples illustrating true dialogue are followed by the "Discipline Game." This simulation of typical classroom conflicts teaches people how to practice true dialogue in resolving discipline problems.

Chapter 10. Problem-Solving in the Classroom

Teachers and students can liberate themselves from conflict and free themselves to learn by democratically naming, analyzing and solving classroom problems. This process uses any of the social literacy techniques and reflects all of the Social Literacy principles. People speak true words embedded in critically conscious dialogue about oppressive and liberating classroom rules. Several illustrations are followed by a description of "problem-posing education" as a means for developing critically conscious, democratically active students.

Chapter 11. Problem-Solving in a Street Gang

The Ghetto Brothers were an "army of the streets." At their request, a teacher worked with them to establish a positive image in the community. The transformation of gang activities, relationships and goals illustrates the impact of a socially literate, problem-posing educator. Among other characteristics such a person has intense faith in the potential of other human beings to love and to learn.

PART III: THE CHOICE

Chapter 12. Continued Rebellion or Peace in Our Nation's Schools

National statistics on cycles of school violence indicate an ongoing civil war. In surveys over the last decade, a majority of students say they are oppressed by undemocratic school practices. They respond by passive resistance (inattention in class, lateness to class, tardiness to school) and by active resistance (sniper tactics and harassment in class, sabotage through thefts, assaults, vandalism, and arson). Educators' responses range from magical-conforming denial and avoidance of the problem to naive-reforming attempts to convert bad students. These strategies passively or actively perpetuate the cyles of violence. Peace can be won by educators and students who work together to democratically transform their relationships in the classroom and the school. Social Literacy is a potent method for liberating people from conflict, freeing people to learn and making schools an easier place in which to love.